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OFFICE OF THE INSPECTOR GENERAL

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Prison and parole staff's multiple mistakes led to parolee's improper release the day before girl's stabbing

SACRAMENTO—Staff mistakes and failures to follow policy caused San Quentin State Prison to release—without proper supervision—the inmate accused of stabbing a 15-year-old girl in a San Francisco bakery, the Inspector General reported today.

“The department’s mission is to protect public safety, but in this instance, they failed their mission on several fronts,” said Inspector General Matthew L. Cate. “It is vital that San Quentin and the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation take steps to prevent the policy breaches that prompted this inappropriate release.”

In a 20-page report made public today, the Inspector General reported the findings of a four-month special review into the release of inmate Scott Thomas, a career criminal who was on “high control” status for assaulting two correctional officers. The Office of the Inspector General initiated the special review at the request of the governor’s office. The Inspector General provided the governor and the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation a confidential version of the report that contained two additional findings concerning Thomas’s health care while incarcerated.

Thomas, who should have been released to a parole agent’s custody no sooner than Sunday, May 20, was mistakenly released from San Quentin on Friday, May 18. Dropped off unsupervised in the local community, Thomas was hundreds of miles from his assigned county of parole—Los Angeles County. The following day, Thomas entered a San Francisco bakery and allegedly stabbed the teen multiple times. He is also accused of stabbing a 60-year-old man who came to the teen’s rescue.

“One individual is not responsible for Thomas’s improper release,” said Cate. “Our review found several staff members made mistakes, and I hope that our report guides the department in making the needed changes, whether those changes are remedial job training or increased accountability.”

The Inspector General found a number of staff oversights and breaches of policy. Most notably, several case records staff members failed to notice that Thomas was a “high control” inmate even though this designation was clearly marked in his file.

San Quentin released Thomas on a Friday, in violation of state law, which mandates that high control inmates, who require maximum supervision, cannot be released on Fridays. Nevertheless, case records staff neglected to apply this mandate to Thomas, a high control inmate.

In addition, Thomas’s parole agent failed to contact San Quentin and provide a parole plan, in violation of department policy. Even without the parole agent’s notification, case records staff should have known from the numerous notations in Thomas’s file that Thomas was a high-risk parolee just released from segregated housing, requiring release to his parole agent’s custody.

In yet another violation of department policy, a correctional counselor approved Thomas’s direct release to the community despite multiple red flags in Thomas’s file identifying him as “high control.” This final error ultimately led to the department’s failure to protect public safety.

Among other findings, the Inspector General discovered that case records staff misidentified Scott Thomas, a white inmate, as the subject of an Alameda County warrant for Steven Thomas, a black inmate. Despite both inmates having different first names and physical descriptions, the staff confused the two and handed over Scott Thomas to the custody of Alameda County on May 18. Alameda County immediately returned Thomas, and only hours later San Quentin again mistakenly released Scott Thomas—this time to the streets. Although this misidentification did not directly contribute to Thomas’s improper release, two case records staff members claimed the error caused them to feel rushed for time as they completed Thomas’s paperwork.

The full text of the Office of the Inspector General’s special review may be viewed and downloaded from the Office of the Inspector General’s Web site at <http://www.oig.ca.gov/>.

The Office of the Inspector General is an independent state agency responsible for oversight of the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. The office carries out its mission by conducting audits, special reviews, and investigations of the department to uncover criminal conduct, administrative wrongdoing, poor management practices, waste, fraud, and other abuses by staff, supervisors, and management. The Office of the Inspector General conducted this special review under the authority provided in California Penal Code section 6126.

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